THE TENEMENT HOUSE PROBLEM

INCLUDING THE REPORT OF THE NEW YORK STATE TENEMENT HOUSE COMMISSION OF 1900

BY VARIOUS WRITERS

EDITED BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES

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HOUSING CONDITIONS IN BUFFALO

BY WILLIAM A. DOUGLAS AND WILLIAMS LANSING

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WORKINGMEN'S HOMES IN BUFFALO.

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HOUSING CONDITIONS IN BUFFALO

THE city of Buffalo began to exist about the year 1800, but at that time there were only a few scattering houses, and as late as 1814, when the city was burned by the British, there were not over three or four thousand inhabitants. The original settlers were nearly all of English descent, coming from New England, eastern New York, and New Jersey, but about 1840 a large emigration of Germans began, which has continued more or less since that time, until now there is probably more than one-third of the total population of 353,000 of German descent. These people were of a frugal, thrifty, and industrious class, one of whose chief ambitions was to own the house and land which the family occupied. To them is probably to be ascribed in considerable degree the conservatism which has always characterized the city. This conservatism has sometimes been accounted a fault, but it is perhaps a better foundation for a growing city than too much so-called enterprise and love of speculation. This German desire of ownership has affected the whole life of the city, and it is for this reason largely that Buffalo is preëminently a city of homes.

The city fronts on Niagara River and Lake Erie, and contains an area of 42 square miles, with a population, according to the census of 1900, of 353,000, an increase of about 100,000 since the last enumeration, in 1890. The business section lies rather compactly near the water front, and from this as a centre the city spreads out in the shape of a fan for about five miles. This resemblance to a fan is striking, and is emphasized from the fact that the city was laid out by Joseph Ellicott, who had assisted L'Enfant, the engineer of the city of Washington, and who had repeated in Buffalo, to some extent, the system of radial avenues planned by his superior in the former city. As will be seen by reference to the map, this business section is bounded on the south by the Buffalo River, which has long been and is the harbor of Buffalo. There the boats receive and discharge cargo. Up to within twenty years that portion of the city immediately north of the river and between Main Street and the lake was the centre of the commercial interests. The Board of Trade was there, and numerous shops, warehouses, and hotels.

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Since that time the Board of Trade has moved farther up town, and with it has gone much of the activity formerly prevailing in that section, with a consequent heavy fall in the value of real estate and its abandonment largely for business purposes. This is the region now occupied by Italians, and is practically given up to them. The old hotels, warehouses, and shops have been converted into tenement houses, some new tenement houses built, and there the Italians have increased and multiplied until now they number about 20,000. In this locality is situated Canal Street, which is the resort of the worst and lowest order of prostitutes, together with a motley assortment of sailors, vagrants, and dive keepers, with whom the tenement population come constantly in contact. There are also numerous lodging houses where the sailors from the lakes live much of the time when off duty, particularly in the winter season. The Italians have been coming to Buffalo for about twenty years. They are thrifty and industrious, not given to immorality, and are steadily improving in condition. Some of them have become moderately well-to-do. A large number of them are employed about the docks or as street laborers, also in railway construction. Many also in the summer season go into the country and labor about the fields, particularly in the picking of small fruits and vegetables for canning companies. Many of these people are small fruit and nut dealers, or go about with street organs and pianos. The children go to school for a comparatively short time, their parents constantly pressing to get them out, so that they can help support the family.

On the East Side of the city, about two miles from the Italian settlement, is another district almost exclusively inhabited by Poles. They began coming to Buffalo about 1870, and have increased until they now number about 60,000. With few exceptions, these people live in small, detached houses of wood, sometimes 2 stories in height, sometimes 2½, often only 1 story. In almost all of these houses there are two families, frequently three, and often as many as five, six, or seven. The houses are usually built on a lot 25 to 30 feet front, and from 100 to 150 feet in depth. There is always considerable space between the houses and usually a fair amount in the rear, so that, though there is much over-crowding, there is usually good ventilation of air in the houses and plenty of it outside. The Poles are thrifty and industrious, but when out of work sometimes individuals among them are given to pilfering, particularly from the railroad yards, which are large and numerous in their vicinity. A very large number of the children are sent to the parochial schools, where often the teachers know only the Polish language, and in consequence many of the children can neither read nor write English.

The tenement house evil in Buffalo is practically confined to two

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One of Buffalo's Worst Tenements — In the Italian Quarter.

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districts, the one inhabited principally by Italians and for convenience called the Italian District; the other inhabited by Poles, and called the Polish District.

In the summer of 1892, when an epidemic of cholera was threatening this country, a committee from the Charity Organization Society of Buffalo, known as the "Committee on Sanitary Conditions in the Homes of the Poor," undertook, as coming within the scope of its work, an investigation of the tenement and lodging houses, with a view primarily of ascertaining their sanitary condition. In making such examination it was thought advisable to ascertain other facts as related to the question of sanitation, and to thus acquire a body of statistics which might be useful in studying the whole question of tenement house life. Through the coöperation of the Department of Health, the agents of the Charity Organization Society were appointed health inspectors, and through them a large body of statistics was gathered as to the number of tenement and lodging houses, number of occupants, sanitary condition, etc., which was embodied in the report of the Committee made to the Society in 1892, and contained in the Annual Report of the Society for that year. This report showed that the tenement house evil had already reached surprising proportions, and it was voted that something ought to be done at once to restrict and regulate the abuses. The Committee were therefore authorized to prepare suitable ordinances for this purpose and procure their enactment into law if possible. Under the charter of the city of Buffalo the Department of Health had ample and far-reaching power to regulate tenement and lodging houses, only needing to be supplemented by proper ordinances to make it specific and effective. The Committee thereupon, with the approval of the Society, undertook the drafting and preparation of a set of ordinances which should adequately regulate and control the erection and maintenance of tenement and lodging houses. Much of the winter of 1892 and 1893 was spent by the Committee in such preparation, aided and advised by architects, builders, and sanitary experts, using as a model similar laws made in New York and Boston, adapting them to the differing conditions and changing them where improvement seemed possible. They were then presented to the Common Council, and after much labor on the part of the Committee in attending hearings before the Council and influencing public sentiment, the ordinances were finally adopted late in the spring of 1893, and became sections 121 to 150 of the ordinances of the city of Buffalo, and have been in force ever since.

The operation of these ordinances has resulted in much improvement in Buffalo's tenement and lodging houses. The sanitary conditions on the whole are better, there is less over-crowding and the

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occupation of cellars has practically ceased, and very few new houses have been erected since, and those of good character.

During the past summer a new investigation of the tenement houses has been made. The details of this investigation will be found set forth in Appendix 7. From the results of these inspections it does not appear that the tenement house problem has as yet reached large proportions in Buffalo. The facts collected indicate that the average conditions are not bad as compared with other cities in America. There seems on the whole to be plenty of light and air and ventilation; that the sanitary conditions are usually as good as could be expected, and that there is no indication of a disproportionate amount of sickness and death in the tenement house population. It does not mean, however, that there are not very many instances where the conditions are exceedingly bad. In the Italian Quarter, as has been suggested before, there are a considerable number of houses not fit for habitation by human beings, where the sanitary conditions are bad, always have been, and always will be. There are cases of over-crowding which are nearly as bad as can be found anywhere, and there is often a total lack of effort on the part of the owner or lessee to give to the occupants any adequate return for the rent paid. In the Polish District the principal evil seems to be that of over-crowding. There is one instance of a two-story frame house on a 25-foot lot about 100 feet deep, where seven families are living, numbering all together 51 persons, nevertheless, this particular house having space all about it, there is light and air in every room of the house.

The ordinances referred to above, enacted in 1893, it is believed are quite sufficient to control the tenement house evil in Buffalo, providing they are strictly enforced. This is the greatest difficulty. One of the principal reasons for this is a lack of sufficient inspection. The ordinances provide for only one inspector, and it is probably impossible for one man to properly look after the situation. Generally, it may be said that a bad tenement can only be kept in proper condition by constant inspection and the severest sort of measures. Then, too, there is often a disposition on the part of those having in hand the enforcement of the law to be lenient with offenders, and instead of summary punishment, to let off the offender upon his promise to remedy the evil complained of. There is also of course at all times the habits of the tenants themselves to contend with. The ordinances provide for janitors in every house having over eight families. This, however, is not strictly enforced, and oftentimes the so-called janitor is a woman who gets a rebate in rent for overlooking the house. None of the tenants respect her authority, and she is practically powerless. The ordinances also provide for a sys-

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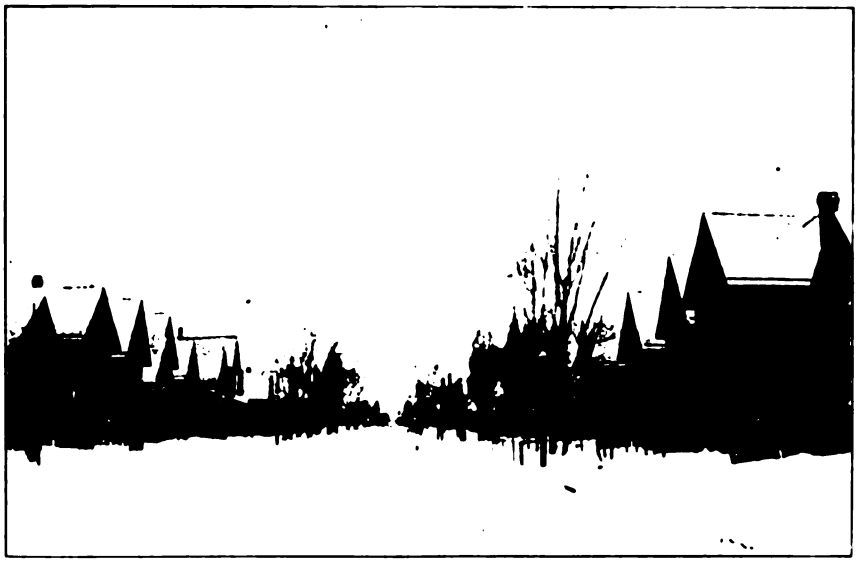
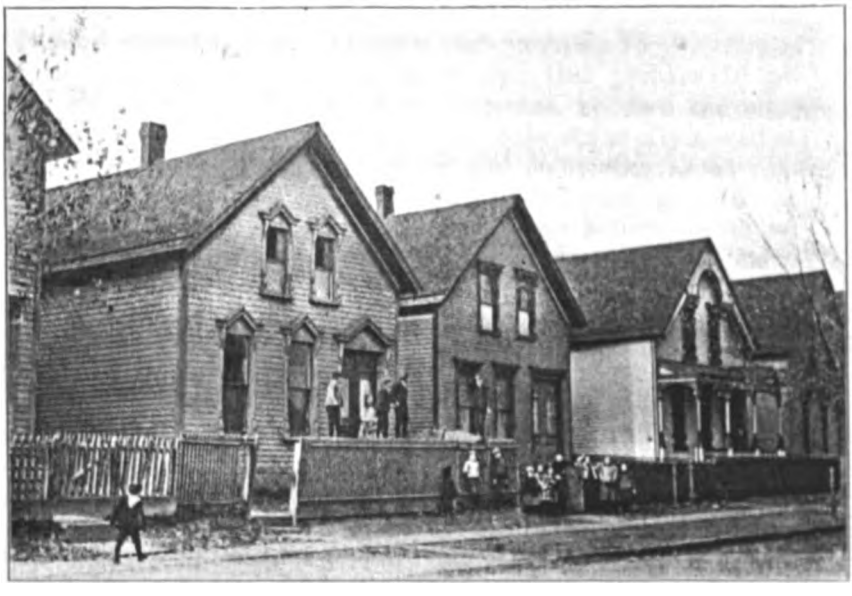


WORKINGMEN'S HOMES — SHERMAN STREET.



FOX STREET.

BUFFALO - TYPICAL COTTAGES IN THE POLISH DISTRICT.

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tem of registration yearly of all tenement houses and the filing of a plan of the house, if any changes have been made since the last filing. This is a regulation believed to be extremely useful, but it is not enforced as strictly as it should be, largely for the reason given above, lack of sufficient inspecting and controlling force. Generally, it may be said, that there is considerable lack in the enforcement of the ordinances. No doubt, if the inspecting force were increased and the inspectors were to give their whole time to the work, the conditions could be very much improved and could be kept so.

A recent inspection indicates that the tenement house dwellers are learning how to live cleaner and better. There is unquestionably a marked improvement in this respect over the conditions that existed seven years ago, and one is constrained to believe that if a good habitation were furnished to the tenant, it would not only better his circumstances morally as well as physically, but would appeal to his pride in maintaining better conditions.

Where the tenement house dweller owns the house he lives in, the difference in the condition of the building is marked.

While it is impossible to get exact statistics as to the number of houses in Buffalo, or as to the number of houses owned by the occupants, or as to the amount of indebtedness on such houses, yet careful inquiry among residents of Buffalo, who are familiar with the general situation, would indicate that probably 75 per cent of the houses are owned by the occupants and that perhaps 50 per cent of them, particularly among the Germans, are free and clear of encumbrance. Almost the entire East Side of the city so-called, being that portion east of Main Street and containing about two-thirds of the population, is occupied by houses costing, with the land attached, from $1000 to $5000 each. These houses are almost invariably of wood, are from one to two stories in height and stand upon lots from 25 to 40 feet in front by 100 to 150 feet in depth. A typical house on the East Side would be perhaps two stories in height, containing parlor, dining room, and kitchen, with three or four sleeping rooms, and costing $2500.

The land would cost from $25 to $40 per front foot, making, in case of a 25-foot lot at an average price of $30, $750 for the land, $2500 for the house, or a total of $3250. Of these houses there are great numbers. There are also a large number of houses where the land has been bought for perhaps $20 a foot, with a house costing $1000, which would make the total investment on a 25-foot lot for land and house, $1500. The present tax rate in Buffalo, including both city and county taxes, is about $22 per thousand, which, for a $1500 investment, would be $33; adding to this 6 per cent

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of the investment, or $90, as rental, would give a total of $123, or slightly more than $10 per month. This of course makes no allowance for insurance or repairs, but in a house of this character they would be small and might properly be included within the six per cent, as that is a high rate of interest at the present time. There are houses, no doubt, in some localities, where the total investment may not be more than $1000, but this would be the minimum. Many houses are built, costing about $2500, on a 25 or 30 foot lot, which are divided into two apartments, the first story being for one family, the second story for a second, and having a common hall. Apartments of this character rent for from $8 to $15 per month, depending upon the locality and the value of the land. They furnish very comfortable habitations, and are occupied by small tradesmen, artisans, clerks, etc. There are, as has been said, better houses, which may run in cost as high as $5000, but they are comparatively few in the district mentioned. The range therefore from $1000 to $5000, as the total cost of a house and lot, will include a very large majority of the East Side dwellings. In the Polish District, as has been mentioned, similar housing conditions prevail, except that here there is an almost universal tendency for the owner to divide the house between two or more families. This, of course, reduces the rent very considerably, but on the other hand leads to over-crowding and to other bad conditions. The same characteristics among the population which make for ownership of the house are also a strong factor in the accumulation of savings. There are four savings-banks in the city of Buffalo: the Buffalo Savings Bank, with 31,124 depositors, and $15,355,667.53 deposits; the Empire, with 4572 depositors and $1,315,037.85 deposits; the Erie County, with 57,131 depositors and $25,468,298.66 deposits; and the Western Savings Bank, with 8059 depositors, and $5,094,593.74 deposits, or a total of 100,886 depositors and $47,231,597.78 deposits. As the population of Buffalo, according to the last census, is in round numbers 353,000, there is nearly one person in three out of the total population who is a depositor in a savings-bank. There are also a considerable number of building and loan associations, having total deposits of $3,477,899, making a total of savings contained in the savings-banks and building and loan associations of over fifty millions of dollars.

These savings have been and are largely utilized in the construction of dwellings, and furnish a continual fund, to which the would-be owner may resort for loans at reasonable rates. The present rate of interest at the savings-banks is from 4 to 4½ per cent on a valuation of about 50 per cent of the property. The building and loan associations also make loans almost exclusively

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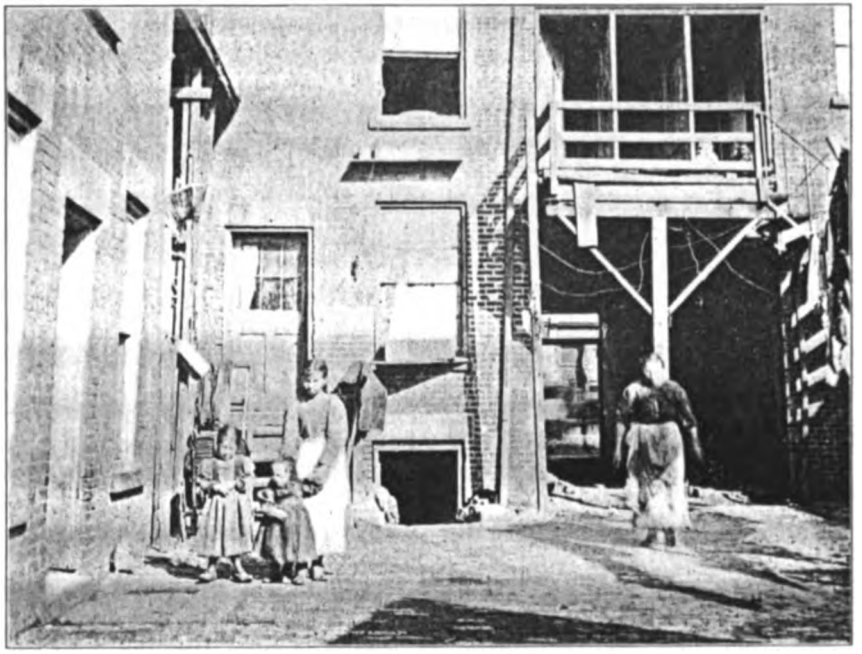

Rear of Tenement in Seneca Street.

Exterior of Le Couteux Street Tenement.

BUFFALO.

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on small dwellings, and they have clients among a class of people who have only their savings to invest. One of these companies, and that not the largest, states that it has built 2000 homes and has helped to build 5000 other homes. It is probable that these building and loan associations have had a very large influence in assisting the wage-earners to acquire and own property.

The city covers a territory, as has been said early in this report, of 42 square miles. Its general form is that of a parallelogram, and the distance of the city limits from the city hall, which is about the starting-point for all street cars and the centre of the business section of the city, is between 4 and 5½ miles.

There is an excellent system of street-car transportation, which is monopolized by one company, and a system of transfers is in effect, which makes it possible to go from one side of the city to the other, in any direction, at a uniform fare of 5 cents. The street-cars traverse the distance between the city hall and the city line in any direction in from 25 to 35 minutes, and it is possible to go from one side of the city to the other, a distance of perhaps 9 miles, in about 55 minutes. There is no difficulty, therefore, in a working-man getting from his house anywhere within the city limits to any other portion of the city, where his work may be, within a reasonable time, say on an average one-half hour.

The city is believed to be one of the best paved in the United States. The annual report of the Department of Public Works, for the year ending December 31, 1899, the last report available, shows that there were at that time 216.90 miles of asphalt paving, 7.54 miles of brick paving, 104 miles of block stone, and 8 miles of macadam. Nearly two-thirds, therefore, of the paving is asphalt, and this is largely in the residence districts of the city. This insures a sanitary condition and cleanliness that can be attained by no other kind of paving. It further affects favorably transportation for the working-men, who are able to get to and from their work, over long distances, with great ease and celerity by means of bicycles. Indeed, it is believed that the bicycle plays a larger share in the comfort and convenience of the working-man in Buffalo than in any other city in America. It is known that there is among the working-men a large market for the second-hand bicycles which are discarded by those who have more money to spend for this purpose.

In Buffalo, then, it is perfectly possible for a very much larger population to be housed in dwellings not to exceed two stories in height, and yet be able to get to and from all parts of the city in a very reasonable time. It is probable that twice the population that Buffalo now contains, or in the neighborhood of 800,000, could be housed in the manner stated without building the dwellings to any

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greater height than at present, and yet the means of transportation, supplemented by some further development, would be sufficient. This too, in the face of the fact that the centre of Buffalo is practically against the water front, and that another city as large as suggested, under ideal conditions, might be as easily reachéd and within the same time, thus serving a population of say 1,500,000 housed in practically detached dwellings. This is not an exaggerated statement and seems to be easily demonstrable where the conditions are favorable. The city of Chicago contains over 1,500,000 of people, and, like Buffalo, has its business centre against the water front, and yet this large population is practically all housed in two-story dwellings and served by the street-cars and two elevated roads. In Philadelphia very much the same conditions exist; and yet the tenement house evil does not exist there.

From a survey, then, of all the conditions as they exist in the city of Buffalo, it would seem that there is no necessity whatever for the existence of the tenement house system. There is plenty of room for houses of moderate height, easily accessible from all parts of the city by the present means of transportation, and there is room for very much larger growth under the same conditions. It seems possible, therefore, by the enforcement of sufficiently strict regulations, to gradually exterminate the evil as it exists, and to prevent its development in the future. These are the lines upon which the enactment of law should proceed, and if the time is to come when more unfavorable housing conditions must prevail, then the evil day should be postponed as long as possible.

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